

# Building a strong Indigenous childcare workforce: Early childhood training in the Northern Territory

At the heart of improving early learning participation and outcomes in the Northern Territory is boosting the number of quality early childhood services, ensuring their cultural and educational appropriateness, and building a strong Indigenous educational workforce.



**Indigenous children's participation in good early childhood programs can set them up for academic success and enable a smooth transition to school. However, at present, too few Indigenous children participate in quality early childhood programs, including preschool, and many struggle when they start school.**

Young Indigenous children tend to have much lower levels of literacy and numeracy than the Australian average, and school completion levels are very low. 'Closing the gap' – in terms of learning outcomes (as well as health and housing) – is a major imperative for education authorities, and especially in the Northern Territory.

## STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING SERVICES

The main reasons for low preschool attendance are a lack of appropriate services (especially in remote communities), poverty and poor education levels in Indigenous households.

Many families don't feel comfortable with schooling and are unfamiliar with the benefits of appropriate early childhood services. Many remote Indigenous families have limited, if any, access to culturally rich and educationally significant early childhood services. This hampers family participation in early learning programs.

**Evidence indicates that the presence of qualified early childhood educators boosts learning outcomes for all children. In Indigenous communities, employment of early childhood practitioners who are Indigenous and who identify with local community groups increases the likelihood of families wanting to participate in education and early childhood services.**

The key factor in Indigenous (and indeed all) communities, is that families must identify with their schools and educational services, trust them, share common values and goals for children, and feel connected.

## BUILDING THE WORKFORCE

There are several models and strategies for building a strong early childhood workforce and better connecting education and community. Building community and capacity to 'grow' their own teachers and early childhood educators is at the core of strengthening education in Indigenous communities. In the Northern Territory, Charles Darwin University offers a range of in-community programs to build the skills and confidence needed to work purposefully and appropriately in early childhood settings with largely Indigenous populations.

A registered training organisation, it provides a range of children's services courses that are customised for culturally appropriate learning experiences at a range of levels and then articulate into higher-education degrees, including early childhood teaching. Charles Darwin University's new Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations funded teacher education partnership with Catholic Education is an innovative model of in-community teacher preparation.

## SCHOOL-BASED APPRENTICESHIPS

Charles Darwin University's Northern Territory school-based apprenticeship course has been a special success story. It offers a mix of school and work-based training and is planned around students' areas of interest and learning needs, including literacy levels. It is designed to be delivered on a one-to-one basis to ensure students are well mentored and supported.

Terri Farmer (pictured left), a border at Kormilda College in Darwin, is one of the successes of this school-based apprenticeship model. Terri comes from Garden Point (Purlarumpi) which is on Melville Island, just north of Darwin.

**Being familiar with each student's community is important to the course. Understanding community, working in it and talking about it contextualises the learning and builds trust between course participants and teachers.**

Terri said she wanted to do the childcare course so she could 'play with little kids and read stories to them, do colouring and make sure they wash their hands before they eat.' This starting point determined which units would be taught first and how.

Terri's comment that washing hands was important and that children like to play indicated the course should begin with the units 'Ensure health and safety' (CHCCN1D) and 'Deliver activities to stimulate children's development and enhance their leisure' (CHCPR1C). Learning and assessment tasks were then planned around her interests and work experiences. Over the past 12 months Terri has successfully completed a number of units from the Certificate III in Children's Services.

The next step is on-the-job training and support at the school's childcare centre. Workplace training is ideal for education that is meaningful and practical. On-site, practical teaching and learning tasks are complemented with video-based vignettes and digital stories that model culturally appropriate best practice and illustrate learning tasks and competencies.

Key assessment strategies involve having students record their learning and comment on it and how it is applied. Observations and log books completed by the employer are also important learning and assessment tools.

Terri is the first Indigenous school-based trainee in children's services in Darwin supported by her school and the school's childcare centre.

## A PATHWAY TO STRONGER SERVICES

Charles Darwin University delivers vocational education and training courses around the Top End of the Northern Territory, including Certificate III and Diploma of Children's Services courses, and various childcare courses to students in high schools.

The Diploma of Children's Services (a two-year qualification) leads directly to the Bachelor of Children's Services and then to the Graduate Diploma of Teaching and Learning.

These courses enable students to have a clear academic and career pathway: from vocational education and training certificates and diplomas, to degree-level qualifications, including a teaching qualification. It is possible to complete the full sequence of study in the equivalent of four years, full-time study. Step-by-step career pathways are important to strengthening early childhood care and education services to Indigenous communities.

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